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CAPITOL SPOTLIGHT
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August 3, 1983

"U.S. AND ISRAEL AGREE ON LEBANON"

The recent talks between top-level American officials (including President Reagan) and Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Arens and Foreign Minister Yitzchak Shamir succeeded beyond anyone's expectations. For the first time in a long time, there was substantial evidence of complete agreement between the United States and Israel on a major issue. The issue, of course, was the immediate future of Lebanon.

According to Richard Bernstein of the New York Times, reliable Israeli diplomatic sources ecstatically judged the visit as "the most successful ever."

Prior to the arrival of Arens and Shamir, Washington was rife with rumors that the Reagan Administration was prepared to bring maximum pressure on Israel to scuttle the plan for redeployment of Israel defense forces in Lebanon. The President was expected to argue that withdrawal of I.D.F. troops from the Shouf Mountains area to the Alawi River would represent an unacceptable move towards permanent partitioning of Lebanon. After all, everyone knew that Lebanese President Amin Gemayel had pleaded with Reagan the week before to block I.D.F. redeployment.

The Israelis came to Washington to explain the necessity of redeployment--not to seek American approval. In the judgment of Prime Minister Begin and his cabinet, no American pressure could bring Israel to tolerate the current level of casualties in Lebanon. (Of the over five hundred Israeli casualties in Lebanon, over one hundred fifty have occurred since the cease fire last year.)

We appeared to be headed for a clash between America's notions of Lebanon's longterm interests and Israel's notion of her immediate military imperative.

The collision was averted because the United States made a realistic assessment of the situation. It was clear that Israel had made a good faith commitment to the full and prompt withdrawal of all troops from Lebanon. Even elements in the American government not always friendly to Israel conceded that Israel had met her obligations to the drive for elimination of foreign troops from Lebanon.

For once, the government of the United States understood that there are circumstances in which one side is right and the other wrong--the truth is not always "somewhere in the middle." The stalemate in Lebanon is due entirely to the total unwillingness of Syria and the P.L.O. to relinquish the Lebanese territories they hold.

The American government recognized that the only hope of a Syrian withdrawal rested with the continued presence of Israeli forces in Southern Lebanon. It took only simple common sense to recognize that the United States could not expect Israel to keep pressure on the Syrians for withdrawal and, at the same time, retain basically indefensible lines.

It is important to note that the Arens-Shamir trip was basically a substitute for a long-planned visit which Begin could not keep for personal reasons. The success of the trip demonstrates once again the stability and reliability of the Israeli political system. Unlike most Arab countries, the Israeli system is not built on a single personality or a single ruling family or elite. It is Israel's inherently stable political system which makes her so valuable an ally for the United States.

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